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ABSTRACT

Presented are selected techniques for nurturing the development of self-reliance in children from birth to 3 years. Literature focused on self-reliance, growth rates, encouragement of self-reliant growth, and the influences of parents and teachers is reviewed, and 22 nurturing techniques of caregivers, teachers, parents, and others are described. The recommended techniques for fostering the rudiments of self-reliance concern the areas of social and emotional growth, physical and cognitive development, creative experiences, and communication skills. Techniques are organized by age: birth to 18 months and 18 months to 36 months. It is concluded that a child needs encouragement in order to develop a basic feeling of self-reliance. Adults are responsible for creating an environment, both inside and outside the home, that encourages growth in self-reliant behavior on a continuous basis. (RH)

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Techniques for Nurturing the Rudiments of Self-Reliance in Children from Birth to Age Three

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Abstract

Selected techniques for nurturing the development of self-reliance in children from birth to age three are presented in two ways: first, through a review of related literature, and second, by the sharing of techniques recommended by experienced caregivers. The suggestions were collected during exploratory sessions with undergraduate and graduate university students who were experienced caregivers. The recommended techniques for fostering the rudiments of self-reliance in young children are organized into two age groups, birth to 18 months and 18 to 36 months. These techniques for nurturing can be used by day care teachers, parents, older brothers and sisters, counselors, and others.

Key Words: self-reliance, autonomy, independence.

Techniques for Nurturing the Rudiments of Self-Reliance in Children From Birth to Age Three

The development of the rudiments of self-reliance is well established by age three. For example, the development of trust during infancy is important to the later development of a growing sense of self as a separate individual during the second and third years of life.

Healthy attachments and a dependency on nurturing caregivers are essential for the development of self-reliance in infants and toddlers. Children need a balance between acting on their own and recognizing actions that they are not yet capable of accomplishing. Adults contribute to the development of self-reliance by allowing the child some independence and self-control while training, retraining, and directing behaviors toward a greater degree of autonomy. The development of self-reliance represents a shift from external control by others to internal control by the child.

This article presents a variety of methods believed to enhance the development of the rudiments of self-reliance in young children. Recommendations are presented in two ways: first, through a review of literature, and second, by the sharing of techniques recommended by experienced caregivers. The author uses "self-reliant" or "self-reliance," "autonomy" or "autonomous," and "independent" or "independence" interchangeably in the article.

Self-Reliance

The development of self-reliance or autonomy is normal and necessary (Erickson, 1982), and it is a continuous process that is critical to the handling of tasks and decision making in early childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. A gradual growth in self-reliant behavior is a developmental task that everyone faces. Some factors related to this growth are physical maturation, personal motivation, and societal expectations.

A certain degree of independence must be achieved for a child to develop normally and to find approval and happiness (Duvall, 1988). Self-reliant adults who recognize and appreciate the autonomous development of others can nurture and guide children toward developing of the understandings necessary for decision making and problem solving.

Infants, toddlers, and young children need proper guidance while developing thinking, acting, and behaving patterns that are socially and developmentally acceptable. There may be conflicts between parents and/or between caregivers and parents in accepting and encouraging the development of independence in young children because of a variety of reasons, like differences in ideas, practices, philosophies, and educational backgrounds. However, the failure to develop eventually becomes the responsibility of the child who has to accept the consequences of personal

behaviors and decisions.

Growth Rates

There are universal patterns of human development, but children grow at their own rates. During the early formative years, growth is most rapid as the body and the mind develop (Duvall, 1988). The preparation and development in the early years are reflected in decision-making abilities, attitudes, practices, and behaviors as children move into preschool programs and into the schools. The basic roots established early in life will have an impact upon self-reliance throughout childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

Each child has a personal developmental pattern, whether it is toilet training, self-feeding, putting toys away, or the completion of another task, that leads to a greater degree of self-reliant behavior. Recognizing individual growth rates is important in providing an enriched, nurturing environment which allows a child to be self-paced. A child may become overly cautious and afraid of making mistakes when pressured to perform before developmentally ready. This inhibits autonomous development.

The following case studies contrast the development of two children who vary in growth rates (Werner & Strother, 1987). Jeff began to read at age 3. His mother reported that no formal attempt was made to teach him to read but his

interest in reading was encouraged. He liked rhyming words, word games, and going to the library. Jeff's responses to projective testing showed that he "enjoyed" other people, had an adaptable nature, was accessible, and saw his family as happy and caring. He expected himself to do well and depended on his intellect as a major source of satisfaction.

In contrast, Michael, aged 4, had parents who held high expectations which revolved around his achievement. Most of their interaction with Michael consisted of teaching him with flash cards and workbooks. His contacts with children were limited to nursery school, where the teacher reported that he had great difficulty interacting with peers. Michael experienced frustration, anxiety, and reflected a strong need for autonomy. These feelings related directly to the restrictive, high-expectation environment with which he had to cope.

Encouraging Self-Reliant Growth

Independent behavior in young children may be interpreted as resistance by adults (Anselmo, 1987). The child's resistance to requests begins around 18 months and continues to age 5. This is a normal aspect of child development; however, the amount and intensity of the behavior varies. Negative behavior can signal the child's recognition of self as a separate identity and is an expression of the growing need for independence. The

ability to think and work autonomously is an asset for later social and educational experiences (Haswell, Hock, & Wenar, 1981).

Some specific recommendations for fostering autonomous behavior in children were presented by Lawhon and Engelbrecht (1987). They noted that development is based upon many experiences, including the real work that young children do. Beyond the daily routines of cleaning up, special work such as setting the table and placing one's soiled clothing in a basket can be useful responsibilities. These and other opportunities provide emotional, physical, and intellectual development relating to the realities of life (Beach, 1986).

A child's participation in household tasks can enhance feelings of self-worth (Lawhon, 1984), and self-worth has been related to autonomous development (Small, 1988). This learning process begins early in life as reflected in a study where independence was fostered in toddlers whose mothers organized household tasks and daily activities so that children could participate (Williamson, Stansbury, Anderson, Boone, & Grundon, 1987).

Caregivers and parents who promote and teach self-care tasks like dressing, feeding, and toileting are aiding the development of self-reliant behavior. Children gain confidence in their own abilities to perform certain behaviors, whether taught at home or in a child care center.

When self-care and independence tasks are learned well, this success increases the children's self-efficacy in accomplishing other tasks (Bandura, 1986; Hildebrand, 1988).

The importance of fostering self-reliant development in toddlers, defined as the age from 12 to 30 months, is reflected through an emergence of autonomy, a growing vocabulary, and the development of an understanding of means-end relationships (Castle, 1985). For example, toddlers use tools such as brushes, combs, zippers, spoons, knives, cookie cutters, measuring utensils, cups, pitchers, hammers, typewriters, and other items as a means to achieve goals. They also use other objects for pulling, pushing, sliding, and rolling and for developing and carrying out plans for behavior. Children who have freedom to explore and interesting objects to manipulate generate new ways to utilize the items. Toddlers use words and objects to influence and change their environments. These experiences aid in the development of self-care, decision-making, and problem solving techniques.

There is an intrinsic desire to learn, and encouragement fosters autonomy, positive self-esteem, a willingness to explore, and an acceptance of self and others. Encouragement refers to a positive response that acknowledges a child's efforts or specific attributes of work completed (Hitz & Driscoll, 1988).

Children need to learn to judge for themselves. Kamii (1984) noted that praise, when commonly used as a reward, may discourage children from judging for themselves. This can lead to dependency upon adults because children come to rely on the authority figure to determine what is good or bad, right or wrong.

Adults need to utilize developmentally-appropriate guidance techniques as children learn to reason and function independently. The type and degree of control that adults exercise in relating to a child affect the development of autonomy and socially-competent behavior (Bigner, 1985; Hamner & Turner, 1985).

Self-reliant behavior may vary from one day to another depending on current experiences. In a series of cross-sectional studies (Stewart, Sokol, Healy, Chester, & Weinstock-Savoy, 1982), it was found that during major life changes, such as entry into school, children regress to earlier emotional stages of dependency. When major life events occur, autonomy is renegotiated as the individual moves again from dependency to independence. Therefore, feelings of independence may be shaken whenever one is faced with changes or challenges.

The absence of parental controls too early in life can create problems in the child's development of internalized controls (Dornbusch, Carlsmith, Bushwall, Ritter, Leiderman, Hastorf, & Gross, 1985; Patterson & Stouthamer-Loeber,

1984). These writers reported that feelings of self-reliance may be undermined by too much responsibility, too soon.

Responsible behavior needs to be encouraged and established at a young age. Cooperative problem-solving involves an active exchange of ideas between children and/or between children and adults, rather than passive learning of one from another. Problem-solving includes the sharing of differing points of view while trying to achieve a common goal (Tudge & Caruso, 1988). Clearly, somewhere in the development of many children there is a lack of cooperative problem-solving. Young children under three are more likely to be involved in parallel play than group play, but they are establishing the fundamentals necessary for cooperative play, cooperative work, and cooperative problem solving.

Actions Speak

The self-image of teachers (Early Childhood Teacher, 1988) and parents (Small, 1988) can have an effect upon the development, motivation, and expectations of young children. Dr. Kamii noted the importance of the healthy development of those who work with children when suggesting that an aim of education should be the development of autonomy in teachers as well as in children (Early Childhood Teacher, 1988).

The father's impact during the first five years of his child's life is reflected through the research of Grossman,

Pollack, and Golding (1988). These writers examined the quality and quantity of interactions between fathers and their first-born 5-year-olds. The fathers' capacity to support their 5-year-old children's development of healthy autonomy and affiliation was significantly predicted by the men's own autonomy and affiliation as measured 5 ½ years earlier. Men who enjoyed and valued their own capacities for separateness and closeness appeared to encourage these dimensions in their children.

Small (1988) found that mothers with high self-esteem were more likely to provide their children with greater decision-making freedom. The freedom to learn by making decisions is related to the development of self-reliance.

Decision making is evident early in life when a baby chooses one toy out of two or indicates a desire to be held by one adult instead of another. As the child grows, decision-making abilities are expanded and choices become more complex.

Nurturing Techniques for Caregivers, Teachers, Parents, and Others

Guidelines for directing young children toward independent, autonomous behavior were extrapolated from 24 University of North Texas undergraduate and graduate students who were experienced caregivers, teachers, and/or parents. Eighty-three percent of the participants were women. College and university education averaged 3.6 years

and ranged from 1 to 8.5. Caregiving experiences, which included caring for one's own children, brothers and/or sisters, and the child or children of others, averaged 11.9 years and ranged from 4 to 34 years. Each suggestion had been utilized by the caregivers and was felt to be important for the development of young children. Adults are encouraged to read the guidelines and to consider incorporating any of those missing in the life of the young child.

Infancy to Eighteen Months

The 11 most frequently recommended techniques for nurturing caregivers to use in fostering the autonomous development of children from infancy to eighteen months were:

1. To help the child develop trust by responding positively to needs for holding, hugging, soothing, comforting, and loving;

2. To foster a sense of security by having a predictable schedule for resting, sleeping, bathing, eating, and dressing;

3. To aid social, emotional, cognitive, and motor development by providing adequate nurturing interactions with adults and children, and by assuring that there is an appropriate adult-child ratio in group care situations;

4. To accept the child's self-discovery and explorations of body parts;

5. To encourage the development of independence by providing appropriate toys for solitary play and for playing with others;

6. To hold reasonable expectations about the child's abilities in areas of self-feeding, eating, talking, toileting, sleeping, moving, and comprehending instructions and directions;

7. To encourage language development, responsiveness, and social growth by reading, singing, talking, listening, and using finger plays with the child;

8. To establish safe indoor and outdoor environments for the child's pulling-up, sitting up, creeping, crawling, playing, exploring, and resting;

9. To help in establishing security by speaking when approaching, changing clothes when soiled, using auto safety seats, and allowing more time for completing tasks when the child needs it;

10. To provide acceptable choices so the child will begin to develop decision-making processes; and

11. To set some guidelines for safe behavior and self-discipline, such as having the child remain in the high chair until an adult can assist.

Eighteen to Thirty-six Months

The 11 most frequently recommended techniques for nurturing caregivers to use in fostering autonomy or self-reliance in children from 18 to 36 months were:

1. To acknowledge the child's feelings and to direct behavior and words toward socially-acceptable standards;

2. To provide opportunities for the child to listen and to verbalize thoughts and feelings, especially during meals;

3. To use developmentally-appropriate methods for toilet-training which avoid blaming, shaming, and other techniques that lead to feelings of guilt and frustration;

4. To strengthen the child's social relations by increasing opportunities for interactions with significant adults and children;

5. To promote emotional, cognitive, social, and motor skills through suitable toys, games, puzzles, music, and books;

6. To aid the child in assuming responsibilities for actions by helping to clean up spills, carry dishes to dishwasher, put clothes in hamper, flush commode, and empty potty-chair container;

7. To foster security by setting, explaining, and enforcing a few reasonable rules in an environment that reflects love, patience, and rewards;

8. To build independence by having a safe environment for exploring while simultaneously teaching safety procedures and rules;

9. To assure the child that there are times to ask for help and times to work alone;

10. To encourage the child's use of nurturing techniques in caring for animals, people, plants, and dolls; and

11. To foster creative possibilities by helping the child explore the world through role playing.

Conclusions

A child needs encouragement in order to develop a basic feeling of self-reliance like, "I can do it; let me try!" in contrast to "I expect you to do it for me." Adults are responsible for the environment, both in and out of the home, where a child is encouraged to grow in self-reliant behavior on a continuous basis.

The 22 most frequently listed suggestions of the caregivers in this inquiry included activities that provide for social and emotional growth, physical and cognitive development, creative experiences, and communication skills. These elements are essential for the healthy development of young children (Eddowes & Ralph, 1987).

Adults serve as models as they guide children toward self-reliant behavior. Caregivers, teachers, parents, and other significant adults are responsible for providing and utilizing healthy techniques that nurture young children as they develop the basics necessary for becoming independent, self-reliant adults.

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